The Miss America Pageant: Pluralism, Femininity, and Cinderella All in One

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The ways in which women are represented in advertising, the news media, fine art and pornography have become the subject of attack, debate and analysis. Given the omnipresence of the female image in modern capitalist culture, this is hardly surprising. Whenever we walk down the street, watch TV, open a magazine or enter an art gallery, we are faced with images of femininity. These make up a discourse on what it means to be feminine in our culture which affects us all, women and men, in various ways. For women in particular, the images are impossible to ignore. They tell us how to look, how to behave, and how we might expect to be seen and treated by others (Betterton 1).

Introduction

There She Is—Miss America
There She Is—Our Ideal
—Pageant theme song

Regardless of what is on the calendar, every American knows that Labor Day marks the beginning of the end of summer, and that summer truly ends on the first Monday after Labor Day, with the glitz and glamour of the longest running beauty contest, the Miss America pageant.

Throughout the pageant's long history, thousands of young American women, supported by family, friends, and community, have worked and sacrificed (and spent hundreds and, in many cases, several thousands of dollars) in pursuit of wearing America's most coveted crown, gliding down the runway in Atlantic City, New Jersey, to the strains of "There she is—Miss America!" In her book *American Beauty*, Lois W. Banner comments, "The pursuit of beauty and of its attendant features, fashion and dress, has more than any other factor bound together women of different classes, regions, and ethnic groups and constituted a key element in women's separate experience of life." Further,

she says, "For both men and women appearance is a primary mark of identification, a signal of what they consider themselves to be" (vii). While this may be true, perhaps it is more important to consider why this is so, and how it impacts our lives.

The enduring popularity of the Miss America pageant over the course of its seventy-nine year history supports the contention that the pageant represents a microcosm of change in American culture, and the pageant, at any given time in its history, for the most part, reflects the values and beliefs of the greater American society, particularly in its view of women. In his 1971 book about the history of the Miss America pageant, Frank Deford says, "Beauty contests are ingrained into the American consciousness" (12). In her discussion of beauty pageants, Banner argues that

> the Miss America pageant is a striking example both of the breakdown of Victorian prudery in the early twentieth century and the strength of Victorianism in a specific setting. Moreover, although the contest rhetoric, the composition of the parade, and the festival setting were all attempts to make a display of women's bodies respectable, they did not overshadow the fact that the contestants were being judged on how they looked in bathing suits. Even when later pageants added a talent division and gave college scholarships as prizes, the review of the contestants in bathing suits was still the most important part of the competition. Despite pretensions to intellect and talent, physical beauty remained the overriding feature of the ideal American woman. (269-70)

Story of a Pageant

> Adorned with emblem and crown...she is carried in awe-inspiring state. Tight-stretched tambourines and hollow cymbals thunder all round to the stroke of open hands, hollow pipes stir with Phrygian strain.... She rides in procession through great cities and mutely enriches mortals with a blessing not expressed in words. They straw all her path with brass and silver, presenting her with bounteous alms, and scatter over her a snow-shower of roses.
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> —Lucretius (97-53 B.C.), describing the Pageant of Cybele[1]

The Miss America pageant was the brainchild of several Atlantic City, New Jersey, hotel owners who, in 1921, were seeking a means to prolong the summer resort season. The pageant started as a promotional event to extend the summer tourist season beyond the traditional closing date of Labor Day. According to Banner,

The history of beauty contests tells us much about American attitudes toward physical appearance and women's expected roles. Rituals following set procedures, beauty contests have long existed to legitimize the Cinderella mythology for women, to make it seem that beauty is all a woman needs for success and, as a corollary, that beauty ought to be a major pursuit of all women. (249)

On September 7, 1921, the first Miss America pageant, as part of a week-long festival, then titled "A National Beauty Pageant," took place with eight contestants, sponsored by national newspapers, participating. Margaret Gorman, a fifteen-year-old school girl from Washington, D.C., competed against seven other young women and became the first recipient of the crown (Banner 268). Her victory inspired the admiration of many Americans, who saw in Gorman all the basic virtues of American womanhood. President of the American Federation of Labor Samuel Gompers publicly hailed the judges' choice. Gompers reportedly told the *New York Times* that Gorman "represented the type of woman that America needs, strong, redblooded, able to shoulder the responsibilities of homemaking and motherhood. It is in her type that the hope of the country rests" (Bivans 10). The event made a national ritual of the by then powerful notion that the pursuit of beauty ought to be a woman's primary goal (Bivans 10) Ironically, one of the great paradoxes of American women's history is that the pageant was first held in the same year that women were allowed to vote (Faludi 50).

As the festival and beauty tournament achieved nationwide fame in the years that followed, the roster of candidates swelled from eight girls to over seventy entrants representing thirty-six states and Canada. In 1923, for the first and only time in pageant history, a contestant won back-to-back Miss America titles when Ohio's Mary Katherine Campbell, who had defeated reigning champion Margaret Gorman the previous year, returned to recapture her title. Campbell's winning streak abruptly ended in 1924, when she narrowly lost the Miss America crown to Philadelphia's Ruth Malcomson (Bivans 11).

Despite its popularity with the public, the beauty tournament's success was interrupted by a series of embarrassing incidents that focused an unflattering media spotlight upon the event. First, officials forgot to include a no-marriage clause in the original set of rules. Mary Campbell's first runner-up turned out to be Mrs. Everett Barnes, wife of a Pittsburgh Pirates baseball player. Then, "Miss" Boston, Mildred Prendergast, showed up with her attorney husband and seven-month-old baby in tow, and officials discovered that Miss Alaska, Helmar Leiderman, was not only married, but a resident of New York City. The pageant's reputation was further tarnished when several women's clubs

labeled the competition "indecent" and a number of New York newspapers ran inflammatory articles about the supposedly loose morals of the young women who participated in the pageant. In some cases, newspapers retracted their stories (Bivans 12). By the late twenties, the detrimental aftermath of such publicity, compounded by early effects of the Great Depression, eroded critical financial support from the resort's business community, and the fall festival and National Beauty Tournament were discontinued in 1928 (Banner vii).

In September 1933, an attempt was made to revive the beauty tournament. Despite the determined efforts of pageant director Armand T. Nichols, its revival was brief. That year, another fifteen-year-old, Marion Bergeron of Connecticut, won the crown. As was the case with previous pageants, charges of fraud, contestants being married, falsifying residences and other factors culminated in the pageant again being discontinued in 1934 (Banner 12).

The pageant returned in 1935. Two years later, Bette Cooper, Miss America 1937, horrified pageant officials by disappearing. The reason given for her disappearance was that Cooper wanted to stay in school. Pageant officials eventually selected Alice Emerick, Miss Texas, as the winner. A talent competition was added to the pageant in 1938. This was the brainchild of Lenora Slaughter, who served as director for the pageant until her retirement in 1967. During her long tenure as director, Slaughter was credited with restoring and maintaining dignity and morals to the pageant. It was under Slaughter's reign that contestants were kept at a safe distance from unscrupulous men, including some male chaperons. Contestants also had to sign a clause that assured pageant officials they had not committed any acts of "moral turpitude." Most importantly, however, it was under Lenora Slaughter that, beginning in the 1940s, the pageant implemented the awarding of academic scholarships. In 1938, Miss California, Claire James, declared herself Miss America, rather than the judges' choice that year, Miss Ohio, Marilyn Meske. Judges refused to award James the crown because she violated pageant rules by wearing mascara. James was furious. As soon as they named Meske Miss America, James declared, "I can't stand it. I've had one insult after another heaped upon me since I came here." On Sunday morning, she left for New York with her talent agent, Earl Carroll. He announced that the judges were "incompetent" and should be replaced "with some young jitterbugs who know how to judge beauty." James, showing a more concerned side, suggested that she did not mind losing so much herself, but that what distressed her was that various employees at her Atlantic City hotel had lost money wagering on her chances (Deford 147-48).

With all this fuss stirred up, Carroll then declared that Miss James was the people's choice, and thereupon he crowned her in New York as the real Miss America before a crowd of twelve reporters and sixteen photographers. Although this was a minor publicity stunt, James took it more seriously. Years later, she would refer to herself as a former Miss America. She even made a commercial in which she used the title. Interestingly, James was able to deceive many people about being Miss America, but not everyone. During an audition for a television program, she identified herself as a former Miss America. However, this time the person she told this to was the husband of Miss America 1941, Rosemary LaPlanche. James did not get the part (Deford 178). Despite occasional turbulence, the Miss America pageant closed the decade on an upbeat note, as popularity for the contest was soaring.

Miss America had survived the critical decade of the 1930s to emerge into the 1940s with a new confidence to keep the pageant's momentum growing. It was during this decade that several changes were introduced to ensure its growth and enhance its reputation. First, the official title, "The Showman's Variety Jubilee," was changed to "The Miss America Pageant," as suggested by Press Club member Nick Carter. Second, Convention Hall became the new home of the pageant. In addition, restrictions were imposed governing the composition and conduct of judging panels, and the pageant sorority, Mu Alpha Sigma, was organized. Then, after the first runner-up to Miss America 1940 returned to Atlantic City the next year and effortlessly walked off with the crown, a rule was invoked prohibiting contestants from competing in the national competition more than once (Bivans 17).

As America's involvement in World War II escalated, Atlantic City was placed under military occupancy. The glamorous Boardwalk hotels were transformed into barracks housing thousands of soldiers, and Convention Hall became an Army Air Force training site. During one month in 1942, even the glittering lights of the Boardwalk were dimmed when it was suspected that Nazi submarines lurked offshore. Despite the pageant's newfound temporary housing in the Warner Theater, the military conditions in town made it nearly impossible to conduct the production effectively, and much thought was given to discontinuing it until the conclusion of the war. Eventually, city leaders decided that the pageant should be continued because it provided a positive moment in an otherwise sad time. It was during this decade that the pageant decided to focus its efforts on persuading college women to enter the pageant. In 1943, Jean Bartel became the first college woman to win the Miss America pageant. Originally from California, Bartel was a student at the University of Minnesota. In September 1945, the scholarship fund was

established and Bess Myerson, Miss New York City, became the first recipient of a Miss America scholarship. Myerson was also the pageant's first and only Jewish winner (Corliss 103).

Upon the conclusion of World War II in 1945, the pageant returned to Convention Hall, where it continued to gain more and more popularity. It was also at this time that the scholarship fund grew rapidly. In an effort to dignify the image of Miss America, 1948 marked the first year that the winner was crowned wearing an evening gown. This change caused an uproar among the press corps, many of whom stormed out of Atlantic City. They eventually returned, and BeBe Shopp of Minnesota was crowned Miss America that year.

The 1950s ushered in revolutionary changes in the pageant. The first involved Miss America's title, which was officially postdated to allow most of the queen's reign to take place during her actual title year. In September 1950, Miss Alabama, Yolanda Betbeze, was crowned Miss America 1951. Because of this new change there was no Miss America 1950. It was during the 1950s that another milestone occurred. In September 1954, with corporate sponsorships, ABC televised the first pageant live. More than 27,000,000 home viewers watched the program (Deford 193). Lee Meriwether, Miss California, was crowned Miss America 1955. She was the first Miss America crowned in front of a live television audience. Her predecessor, University of Pennsylvania student Evelyn Ay Sampier of Ephrata, Pennsylvania, the 1954 winner of the crown, was the first and only Ivy League Miss America. In 1955, the pageant introduced a master of ceremonies for the pageant. Their choice, Bert Parks, was an instant hit with both viewers and contestants. It was Parks who inaugurated the soon to be second feature of the pageant—the singing of "There She Is: Miss America," written by composer Bernie Wayne. The song was an immediate hit with viewers, and with the exception of three years—1982, 1983, 1984—was the official song of the pageant. In 1958, the pageant switched to CBS and the ratings continued to increase (Deford 195). The 1950s proved to be an enormously successful decade for the pageant. Full state representation had been achieved, the scholarship program had reached $250,000 in funds, and audience viewership had tripled. It was in the 1950s that the Miss America pageant was at its peak.

The 1960s and 1970s were not serene times for the pageant, with several protests highlighting the period. It was an era when American society was in the middle of experiencing radical cultural change—the Vietnam War, antiwar protesters, "hippies," the sexual revolution, and the women's and civil rights movements. Miss America, like much of the nation, struggled to maintain its equilibrium (Bivans 25). In 1965,

Albert Marks, the recently appointed chairman, was slapped with accusations that the pageant was exploitive and degrading to women. Three years later, in September 1968, Atlantic City was invaded by about 200 angry feminists who staged a protest in front of Convention Hall. The group, which called itself the Women's Liberation Front, marched on the Boardwalk where it was alleged that they burned bras, refused to speak with male reporters, chanted anti-pageant slogans, crowned a live sheep, and tossed bras, girdles, makeup, and hair curlers into a "freedom trash can." Despite the protesters' threats to disrupt the telecast, the disturbance was not audible to television viewers; the broadcast continued without incident. The truth was that bras were never burned, but were thrown, along with other symbols of women's suppression, into the now famous trash can.[2] Rita Freedman explains that the pageant was chosen for protest because "it seemed to epitomize woman's role as a passive, decorative object" (vii). The protest was just one of several "zap actions" organized by radical feminists to "focus attention on women's need for liberation." Susan Faludi points out that earlier feminist marches for more serious issues like jobs, pay equity, and coeducation had failed to attract media attention (Faludi 75).

As the pageant entered the 1970s, the controversies continued. Miss America 1972, Laurel Schaefer, was burned in effigy by radical feminists as she toured various cities during her reign. She received threats on her life as well. In 1974, the National Organization of Women (NOW) converged upon Atlantic City to conduct a "Wonder Woman Convention." Feminists marched along the boardwalk chanting anti-pageant sentiment and denouncing Miss America as a "degrading, mindless boob-girlie symbol" (Bivans 26).

While some feminists were upset at what they saw as the sexist nature of the pageant, many civil rights groups charged the pageant with racism. As the civil rights movement gained momentum, it began to pressure the pageant publicly to voice its commitment to increasing minority participation. In 1970, Cheryl Browne won the Miss Iowa title and became the first African American woman to compete in the national contest. This was an important milestone in that it fostered an immediate increase in the visibility of ethnic minorities in the program and paved the way for the first black Miss America thirteen years later. During the 1970s, the pageant seemed to garner more than its share of criticism. Throughout the entire decade, according to *The Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature*, there were only 20 articles written on the pageant—less than in any other decade. Perhaps one reason for this was that the pageant was the antithesis of much of American culture at that time. The conservative values and images of the pageant—"Waspy,"

conservative, traditional—were in stark contrast to the emotively secular era of the 1970s, a decade that legalized abortion, unabashedly promoted the women's lib movement, denounced marriage, focused intensely on the rights of minority groups, and combated anything that was perceived as too conservative.

The 1980s was an era of extremes for the pageant. The pageant continued to gain popularity and achieved some of its greatest triumphs, but it also endured some of its greatest challenges. In September 1980, longtime pageant host Bert Parks was replaced by actor Ron Ely. This decision unnerved many loyal pageant fans, who bombarded pageant headquarters demanding that Parks be reinstated. A media blitz began, with even Johnny Carson initiating a "bring back Bert" campaign. Despite protests, pageant CEO Albert Marks held steadfast to his decision, arguing that replacing Parks was important for the future longevity of the pageant. Organizers felt that Parks had done a superb job for a quarter of a century, although the television format required updating (Bivans 29). In 1982, Ely was succeeded by Gary Collins. Also in 1982, due to contract disputes, the song "There She Is: Miss America" was replaced. From 1982 to 1984, winners Debbie Sue Maffett, Vanessa Williams, and Sharlene Wells were serenaded with "Look at Her" and "Miss America, You're Beautiful." By 1985, the original "There She Is" was reinstated.

The continuing stigma of racial bias began to lessen as the decade of the 1980s started off on an inspiring note. For the first time in pageant history, two black candidates placed in the top ten: Doris Hayes, Miss Washington, and Lencola Sullivan, Miss Arkansas. Hayes was a preliminary talent winner and Sullivan was a swimsuit winner. Sullivan shattered another racial barrier as the first black to finish among the top five (Bivans 28). She was fourth runner-up in the pageant. Three years later, the scenario repeated itself, as once again, two black contestants made the semifinals. This time, however, the judges' historic decisions were announced to the nation—Suzette Charles, Miss New Jersey, and Vanessa Williams had not only made the top five, but they had emerged as first runner-up and Miss America 1984. Their victories made headlines around the world. Black publications such as *Ebony* ran cover stories on Williams and Charles (Norment, "'Miss America'" 132-36). Arguably the leading black entertainment magazine in the country, *Ebony* continued to run cover stories on future Black Miss Americas. Debbye Turner (Norment, "Here She Is" 132-36), Marjorie Vincent (Norment, "Back-to-Back" 46-49), and Kimberly Aiken (Haynes 42-46) were all the subject of cover stories in the magazine.

Williams's victory was memorable due to the fact that she was the first black woman to win the crown. Her selection as Miss America

raised considerable controversy. Williams received death threats from white racists who resented the fact that a black woman finally wore America's most coveted crown. Within certain segments of the black community, some questioned whether Williams's green eyes and golden brown hair made her "sufficiently" black enough. Shortly after her crowning, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) issued a statement declaring Williams as not "in essence Black" (Wilson et al. 152-53). Williams's light-skinned features were a major issue among a number of blacks. Cultural critic Gerald Early compared Williams's predicament to the quadroon character Eliza in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*:

> But our new Miss America is as sweet as any of her sisters before her, so she will not, in the end, bring to mind those great images of the mulatto personality like Holiday, Baker, and Dandridge. Her reign will help us forget them; for while our culture can tolerate desperate black women who want success and love, it cannot tolerate bitter black women who have been denied success and love. Our current Miss America will always bring to mind Eliza and she will clutch her crown and roses in much the same way that Stowe's character clutched her son. She will personify the strength, courage, and culture of Black, middle-class womanhood, and all of its Philistine mediocrity as well. (Early 292-93)

Williams continued to make headlines when, in July 1984, the three major networks announced that nude photographs of her would be published in a men's adult magazine. Publicly humiliated, Williams relinquished her crown on July 24, 1984. First runner-up Suzette Charles filled the remaining seven weeks of her reign.[3] Charles's successor, Sharlene Wells, Miss Utah, was crowned Miss America 1985. The product of a strict Mormon upbringing, and an admitted virgin at the time of her win, Wells, to many of the pageant faithful (and the pageant's management), represented the type of woman that had historically been associated with the Miss America pageant. In an interview with Holly Miller for the *Saturday Evening Post*, Wells claimed her decision to "wait until marriage" was a "personal value" and not a choice she necessarily espoused for everyone. In keeping with her Mormon religious tenets, Wells refrained from coffee, alcohol, and cigarettes. Wells also downplayed the "beauty pageant" image of Miss America, claiming that "the opportunity for scholarships was what caused her to compete for the crown in the first place." She told friends that she would never take part in "one of those contests" until she realized the potential to win a college scholarship (42-45).

Expanding its altruistic theme, by the end of the 1980s, contestants were required to develop a platform to be promoted during their reign as state representatives. The same held true for the Miss America contestants. Minority candidates continued their earlier success. In September 1989, Debbye Turner, Miss Missouri, became the third black woman to win the Miss America title. The first runner-up, Virginia Cha, Miss Maryland, was Asian American. Two minority contestants in the top two spots made pageant history. The following year, in September 1990, history was made again when Marjorie Vincent, Miss Illinois, became the fourth Black recipient of the title. Two consecutive black winners was another historic milestone. In September 1994, Heather Whitestone, a hearing-impaired contestant, made history by becoming the first Miss America with a disability to win the crown. Her win inspired millions of disabled Americans (Gray and Lewis).

Building on growing participant popularity at the local and state levels, by 1997, the number of Miss America hopefuls has grown to over a quarter of a million contestants.[4] Prior to the Miss America pageant, much of society was uncomfortable with the idea of presumably refined women being placed on public display. The promoters of the Miss America pageant were able to overcome the perceived lower-class carnival-like image and create an aura of gentility that "celebrated the young American woman as a symbol of national pride, power, and modernity" (Banner 261).

Throughout its history, the pageant has been the target of protests against wearing swimsuits, especially two-piece suits, and the wearing of high heels with swimwear. The last Miss America to be crowned wearing a swimsuit was Barbara Walker, Miss America of 1947. Writing for *Time* magazine, Richard Corliss reported that, "even the MAO [Miss America Organization] CEO views...the swimsuit segment as a tacky relic of Miss America's childhood" (103-4). Although the pageant organizers no longer require contestants to wear high heels (eliminated in 1995), the popular swimsuit event lives on. (In 1995, viewers voted overwhelmingly in favor of keeping the swimsuit competition.) Another writer argued, "In the beauty pageant the central phenomenon is the dethroning of an aging queen and the ritual coronation of a new one. Without the ritual requirement of selection—a new queen every year—the beauty pageant would have no exoteric purpose" (Jones 103). Whatever the reason, there is evidence that, regardless of the pageant's continuing appeal, there are always those who are uncomfortable with all that beauty pageants represent.

What Is Beauty?

> Beauty is many things—an external radiance, an inner tranquility, a sexual allure, a fact of social exchange. Contradictory definitions of the nature of beauty abound, indicating widespread ambivalence about its meaning.
>
> —Rita Freedman, *Beauty Bound*

Defining beauty is an elusive, if not impossible, task. No single definition fits because as culture evolves, so does the definition of beauty. As in many institutions, where physical appearance is an issue of contention, the Miss America pageant over its seven-decade history has had to deal with the beauty question. Whether blondes won the pageant more than brunettes; did women over 5'7" have a major advantage; or did redheads even have a chance at winning were questions that were asked by observers in the early years. As minority women began to win the pageant, the question of what is beauty became even more prevalent. Vanessa Williams's light-skinned features, Suzette Charles's biracial background, Debbye Turner's pointed features, and Marjorie Vincent's classic black features all were subjects of commentary among media publications. Some journalists argued that Marjorie Vincent's crowning was really the first time that a black woman with classic features won the crown. One female journalist argued:

> Yes, having a Black Miss America was a breakthrough and Vanessa Williams was the first to achieve it. However, until Vincent, there hadn't been a woman with dark skin and classically Negro features to wear the crown.... Vincent with her luscious lips, broad nose and full cheeks, didn't fit what had fit the conventional mold. She was talented, smart, poised, black and very ethnic-looking. And Bert Parks sang she was our ideal and bid her to "go out and greet your subjects." (Helmbrick d6)

In her book *The Beauty Myth*, Naomi Wolf explored the mythological nature of beauty which would have us believe that beauty exists objectively and universally; that "women must want to embody it and men must want to possess women who embody it"; that beauty is "necessary and natural because it is biological, sexual, and evolutionary." The myth continues that "strong men battle for beautiful women, and beautiful women are more reproductively successful" pointing to its inevitability and changelessness. According to Wolf (12), none of this is true. Freedman agrees,

In every era, a dominant beauty standard exists alongside alternative modes that pull women in opposite directions. There is a constant shift in emphasis between erotic sophistication and adolescent innocence. Currently, a delicate ideal is admired alongside a worship of muscles and athleticism. These shifting and conflicting components of the beauty ideal make schizophrenic demands on women to maintain opposite body types at the same time. No wonder women find it hard to sustain a positive body image. (27)[5]

Wolf concludes that "the beauty myth is not based on evolution, sex, gender, aesthetics, or God." It is, rather, about "men's institutions and institutional power" (13).

Reflections in a Mirror

> Mirror, mirror on the wall; who's the fairest one of all?
> —from *Sleeping Beauty*

Many critics of the Miss America pageant point to the obsessive concern with physical appearance that the pageant seems to espouse. Pageant corporate sponsors include major hair care and cosmetics companies, all of which reap enormous profits from enhancing women's natural appearance. In *Beauty Bound*, Freedman reports that "critics [of the cosmetics industry] note that more is spent on self-adornment than on education or social services" (43). Kathy Peiss, in her recent book, *Hope in a Jar*, which chronicles the making of America's beauty culture, says, "When women put on a face, they continue to express ideas of naturalness and artifice, authenticity and deception, propriety and danger, modernity and tradition. Making up remains a gesture bound to perceptions of self and body, the intimate and the social—a gesture rooted in women's everyday lives" (270). Although the first Miss Americas were examples of natural unadorned beauty, those who are successful in the pageant today are skilled artists in enhancing their natural good looks and taking advantage of all the cosmetics industry has to offer.

The 1997 Disney television musical production of the Cinderella story is reminiscent of the Cinderella-like atmosphere in which the Miss America pageant lives and breathes. Exchange the Miss America crown for the glass slipper, and we see the similarities and the innate "exclusionary" quality of beauty, "attainable only by the few." As Freedman so aptly puts it, "Hard at work in her clogs, Cinderella was ignored. Transformed by her satins and slippers, she conquered the world" (68). In the television production, efforts are made to impress upon the audience that the prince fell in love with Cinderella because of her internal

goodness and not her external beauty, but every woman viewer from age eight to eighty saw the lovely Cinderella, with beautifully coifed hair and carefully applied makeup, dressed in her beautiful ball gown and, later in her "to die for" wedding gown, and knew why he chose her—and it was not for her dainty feet! Freedman reminds us that, "even the most naive child knows intuitively that Cinderella could never have been loved by the Prince while dressed in rags. The hidden message, clearly heard by children and adults alike, is that packaging counts, no matter how worthy the inner woman" (66).

The flamboyant Miss America of 1944, Venus Ramey, wrote an article for *Penthouse* magazine in which she said that, "today's Pageant is just a giant promotional vehicle devoid of any wholesome, creative spontaneity. When I won, artifice would automatically disqualify contestants. Nowadays girls are resorting to artificial tanning, dental bonding, hairpieces, false eyelashes, false fingernails, padded busts and hips, and bobbed noses. Caught in the rain, part of them could fall off—or at least start squeaking" (Ramey). Providing support for Ramey's contentions, Wolf notes that "in 1989 five contestants, including Miss Florida, Miss Alaska, and Miss Oregon, were surgically reconstructed by a single Arkansas plastic surgeon" (267). Ramey's observations are in sharp contrast to those of the early promoters of the Miss America pageant who, according to Banner, sought to present "their contestants as natural and unsophisticated." Banner further points out that "their publicity stressed that none of the entrants wore makeup or bobbed their hair—symbols of 1920s modernity" (266).

Moving into the Mainstream

1954 - The pageant is televised for the first time
1968 - Feminists picket the pageant
1984 - Vanessa Williams first African-American to win crown
1995 - Viewers vote to keep swimsuit competition
1997 - Contestants are allowed to wear two-piece swimsuits
2000 - Ban on divorcees and women who have had abortions lifted

The advent of television has done as much to change the face of the Miss America pageant as it has the lives of all Americans. According to Frank Deford, television was responsible for creating the "cookie cutter" image so many critics attribute to the pageant contestants (197). In 1971, the composite contestant was 19 years old, 5 feet 6 inches, 119 pounds, with brown hair, blue eyes, and a fair complexion, and she almost always came from the south and the midwest. And she has not changed

much since then. Marilyn Bergeron, Miss Connecticut, is the only New England contestant ever to win the crown (Neimark 43). Since 1985, the only Miss America to win the crown who was not either a southerner or a midwesterner was Carolyn Suzanne Sapp, Miss Hawaii, and Miss America 1992. Before television, Deford says, Miss Americas worked hard to establish "distinct personalities" (197). Once television took over, Miss America smiles, cries, says thanks when crowned and disappears from television view until the next pageant when she smiles, cries, and says thanks again. To be sure, Miss America frequently makes brief appearances on television shows like *Good Morning America, Today, Live with Regis and Kathie Lee,* and *The David Letterman Show* immediately after the pageant, but this has often been the extent of opportunities to get to know her as a person. By the late 1980s, this changed somewhat with the increasing emphasis on having Miss America become more accessible to the public. During the 1990s, a number of Miss Americas took on controversial platforms. Leanza Cornett, Miss Florida, Miss America 1993, adopted AIDS awareness as her platform. Her successor, Kimberly Aiken, Miss America 1994, and the pageant's fifth black winner, took up the plight of the homeless as her platform during her reign. Miss America 1998, Katherine Shindle, arguably one of the most controversial Miss Americas ever, promoted condom distribution in public schools as her platform. Unlike Leanza Cornett, Shindle herself became involved in policy debates such as advocating condom distribution in the public schools, needle exchanges, and same sex marriage (Peyser 63, Hampson 8a).

Due to her non-traditional image of Miss America, Shindle was the frequent target of hostility from conservatives. In the political magazine, *The Weekly Standard,* Miss America 1944, Venus Ramey, who represented Washington, D.C., lambasted Shindle for what she saw as promoting immoral behavior among students. Midway through her article Ramey stated:

> It's true that the aura of purity that once surrounded Miss Americas had been fading of late. But your crusade to distribute condoms to students has knocked Miss America off her pedestal for good.... And if the press clips I read of you are true, you are advancing this lunacy in other locales across the country. ("Dear Miss America...")

Despite such criticism, Shindle held true to her cause and continued to promote her message until her reign officially concluded in September 1998. Her successor, Nicole Johnson, Miss Virginia, Miss America 1999, like Heather Whitestone, Miss America 1995, suffered from a disabil-

ity—diabetes ("Miss America, message...," 6d). This became her platform as Miss America. In stark contrast to her predecessor, Johnson was a self-described conservative who worked with Pat Robertson's 700 Club, which she co-hosted with Miss America 1973, Terry Meeuwsen. Other born-again Christian Miss Americas were Kellye Cash, Miss America 1987, and Debbye Turner, Miss America 1990 (Nordlinger 17).

Additionally, the importance of television market share has dwarfed other considerations in the continuing drama of the pageant. In the 1960s, the pageant consistently had Neilsen ratings in the high 30s, equating to two-thirds of television viewers watching the pageant. Today pageant officials constantly worry about market share as a barometer of the pageant's continuing success. The return of the two-piece swimsuit to the 1997 pageant was seen by many as a gimmick to improve drooping viewer ratings.[6]

Although there were changes in the 1999 pageant, such as limiting the talent presentations to the top five finalists instead of the traditional top ten, major changes announced in the eligibility rules for future pageants were so disturbing to the pageant board of directors that they resulted in the firing of CEO Robert L. Beck (reported to the public on September 28th). Mr. Beck served as president and CEO for only one year. The Associated Press reported on September 13 that the pageant's board of directors had voted to drop the 50-year ban on contestants who had been married or undergone abortions. According to the news article, former Miss Americas, state pageant directors, current contestants, and former pageant boss Leonard C. Horn were outraged. Horn was credited with predicting that these changes "would ultimately lead to the destruction of the 78-year-old pageant." The 1999 telecast on September 18 played to an all-time low Nielsen rating of 10.1 despite the pageant's experimentation with various format changes over the past several years. Despite the low ratings, it was estimated that 1.3 million more people watched this year's pageant than in 1998 ("Head of Miss America").

Do Clothes Make the Woman?

> Bare midriffs! What's the world of Miss America coming to? For the first time since 1947..., Miss America contestants will be permitted to wear bikinis in the swimsuit competition. Leonard Horn, CEO of the Miss America Organization, explains that the decision "is about choice, individuality and allowing 17- to 24-year-old women to be who they really are," and is not, we repeat, not a ploy to boost ratings.
>
> —"And Miss Nicest Navel..." 17

How important is clothing to the beauty myth? Freedman says that, "as a signal of gender and power, clothing is as important in defining woman's world as the body beneath it." She further asserts that "conflicts between modesty and mobility, between revealment and concealment, remain central issues in women's fashions" (85-87). One of the high points of major events like the Miss America pageant or the movie Oscar awards, at least if the media is to be believed, are the beautiful evening gowns worn at these affairs. Oohs and ahs are audible from the audiences and bystanders of both and are repeated in thousands of homes across the country. In the earlier years in particular, the Miss America contestants' gowns were reminiscent of the lovely gowns worn by debutantes at their formal introduction into society. Freedman says, "Costumed as a pseudo-bride, a debutante prostrates herself before society in a humble gesture of feminine submission, then smiles up from her position below" (78). Similarly, Miss America winners, in their regal attire, smile sweetly and humbly in their attempts to portray the appropriate feminine image.

There is a fine line, as evidenced by swimwear regulations for the Miss America pageant, between the acceptable and the unacceptable.[7] As many women learned, abrasively at times, stepping over the so-called line of respectability brought trouble ranging from unwanted attention to physical attack because of perceived provocative dress.

The Male Gaze[8]

> Women's feelings of inadequacy are epitomized in their feelings about their bodies. A woman can gain the approval and love of men by appearing beautiful. And yet she is told by her mother, who communicates her own insecurities, and by the media that she is not beautiful. She must diet to rid herself of ugly fat; curl, straighten, or dye her hair; learn to apply makeup; learn how to dress; learn how to sit, stand and walk in order to become acceptable. She must shave her legs and armpits, tweeze her eyebrows, bleach the hair on her arms and face in order to become acceptable. She must never forget perfume and deodorant.... The message is clear: there is something wrong with being a woman, with her body, with being herself. Many women even learn to accept the battering of their bodies by husbands or lovers as the price they must pay to achieve acceptance.
>
> —Carol Christ, *Diving Deep and Surfacing*

Feminist writings consistently point out the objectification of the female body and regularly blame men for their obsession with women's

body parts such as the size of their breasts, the length of their legs, or their hair. Deford provides statistics on Miss America contestants' dimensions throughout the pageant's history that show that over time the contestants' busts were larger and waist became smaller, giving rise to comparison with the ubiquitous Barbie doll figure (328-31). Miss America, not unlike many women, was often depicted as the sum of her parts. Freedman comments, "Objectification and preoccupation with isolated body parts dehumanizes women, but it also degrades men when they become so obsessed with ankles or breasts they forget the person within" (69). It was not until 1978, ten years after the famous women's protest, that pageant officials discontinued announcing Miss America hopefuls' measurements as part of their introduction of each contestant. Ten years later, in 1988, they no longer announced the contestants' weight. A review of the Miss America Archives on the Internet, which contains a press release for every Miss America pageant, reveals that, until the dates mentioned, the announcements often included every body measurement imaginable, including such innocuous information as glove size.[9]

Forever Young[10]

> Everywhere one looks there is this glossy little animal, sometimes quite young and sometimes a little older, but always imagined, always pictured as The Girl.
>
> —C.W. Mills

America is consumed with the insatiable desire to be viewed as young. Collectively, the nation worships at the altar of youth. The media provide constant reminders of the importance of maintaining a youthful appearance and stress that youthfulness is next to godliness. The first Miss America was only fifteen. In the seventy-nine years since then, the age of Miss America has not changed that much. The age of the 1997 semi-finalists ranged from eighteen to twenty-four. According to Frank Deford, the average age of Miss America during the period 1936-1970 was 19.35 (325). The maximum age for a Miss America contestant had been twenty-seven until, in 1992, former pageant director Leonard Horn lowered the age to twenty-four. Critic Harvey Cox refers to the pageant as the idolization of "The Girl." The Miss America pageant "represents the mass cultic celebration complete with a rich variety of ancient ritual embellishments, of the growing place of The Girl in the collective soul of America." For Cox, beauty is not the culprit; it is the pageant that creates an idol of youth (16).

Vera Klement describes the trinity of youth, health, and beauty as the hallmark of what constitutes the "good and true" (73). Society's obsession with youth is evident in the style of dress, hairstyles, recreational activities, conversation, every aspect of living. Many former Miss Americas, although still quite beautiful by any standards, seem to have been able to place the pageant in a context that seems real. Claudia Levy, writing about the death at the age of ninety of the first Miss America, Margaret Gorman Cahill, said that Miss Cahill was "bored by the obsession with Miss America contestants." Quoting from a 1956 interview, Levy reports that Cahill said that, although she watched the pageant each year, she often "tired of it and doze[d] off in the chair" (c1).

Conclusion

> At 75, the Miss America Pageant sells an image of young womanhood that is retro and modern, hopelessly uncool—and for all that, we love it.
>
> —Richard Corliss, "Dream Girls"

For many Americans, the pageant is seen as an anachronism, a throwback to the supposed wholesomeness of the 1950s and early 1960s, or "culturally irrelevant." Irrespective of point of view, the Miss America pageant continues as a fascinating piece of American culture. In discussing the so-called "bra-burning" 1968 feminist protest of the pageant, Rita Freedman accurately describes some of the confused emotions the pageant elicits in women, as those who denounce the pageant also often count themselves among those who faithfully watch year after year. She points out that, "even the most 'liberated' among them responded at a deep emotional level to the sanctification of female beauty" (vii).

The question remains—does the pageant reflect the attitudes and beliefs about women of the majority of Americans or do others find the pageant boring and tiresome as did the first Miss America Margaret Gorman Cahill in her later life. If television ratings reflect societal beliefs, then the consistently declining ratings support the contention that the pageant is a thing of the past. However, the plethora of pageants for babies, children, teenagers, and adult women through grandmothers would seem to contradict this position.

The recent sensationalism surrounding the mysterious murder of child beauty queen, JonBenet Ramsey, who was portrayed in pictures not only as stunningly beautiful but dressed and made up to resemble a young woman in her twenties, points to a continuing fascination bordering on obsession with beauty at any age. The popularity of men's maga-

zines, pornography in film and on the Internet, and television shows like *Baywatch*, all seem to indicate that how women are viewed has not changed much. In this light, then, perhaps the Miss America pageant is the lesser of many evils.

On the other hand, back in 1971, Deford stated that "it took the Women's Liberation Movement to point out the really rather obvious truth that if beauty pageants were substantially more than girl-watching exercises, why, there would be pageants for men too" (11). Since that time, a few male pageants have taken place, although none have garnered the level of interest that the Miss America pageant has. In a more unsettling vein, Freedman argues that "the fake wholesomeness of beauty pageants has been called the flip side of pornography. Like a pair of contradictory myths, each side of the image depends on the other. Both distort the female body, making it harder for women to sustain a positive view of themselves" (42). What then, should we believe? Wolf states rather succinctly, "The real issue has nothing to do with whether women wear makeup or don't, gain weight or lose it, have surgery or shun it, dress up or down, make our clothing and faces and bodies into works of art or ignore adornment altogether. *The real problem is our lack of choice*" (272).

In exploring the manifestation of one of life's many paradoxes within the world of the Miss America pageant, Richard Corliss's summation in his *Time* article seems apropros: "The Miss America show shares with those made for TV spectacles the lure of unpredictable thrills and gaffes, adventure and ennui. It's gaudy, it's fake, it's real, it's live! We hate it. We love it!" (Corliss). For many, the death of the Miss America pageant cannot come too soon; seventy-nine years is long enough, they say. As Freedman says, "It is not beauty per se that corrupts, but the assumption that beauty is imperative to femininity" (230). The oft-quoted Deford observes, "The basic, and base, pageant appeal is, and always has been, girl watching—and the fewer clothes the better" (11). This ambivalence about the role of the Miss America pageant in American culture reflects the continuing conflict society experiences when female beauty is equated with competitiveness and must be judged. With minority contestants becoming commonplace and frequent winners, the pageant seemingly has moved beyond issues of race. The conflict of the importance of inner beauty versus physical beauty as exemplified by the Miss America pageant remains unresolved. Inclusion of the Miss America platform and promotion of the pageant as the largest provider of scholarships to women reflects society's struggle to remove physical beauty as a measure of a woman's worth. Continuance of the pageant may depend upon its ability to continue to adapt and

respond to the democratization of feminine beauty and the dispelling of the "beauty myth."

Notes

[1]Cox 16.

[2]The 1968 protest of the Miss America pageant is often cited in books and articles dealing with women's history and feminist issues, e.g., Hymowitz and Weissman 355.

[3]In July 1984, *Penthouse* publisher Robert Guiccione published photographs of Vanessa Williams, then Miss America. A huge controversy ensued, and Williams ended up resigning on July 24, 1984.

[4]In 1971, Deford reported that, "Miss America alone has 3,500 locals and 70,000 contestants annually" and more young women would participate if state pageants could handle more contestants (12).

[5]Freedman offers Marilyn Monroe as an excellent example of this dichotomy of "erotic sophistication and adolescent innocence" (27).

[6]The 1996 13.1 rating or 25 market share was the lowest rating since the pageant was first televised in 1954 (Curran). The 1997 Nielsen rating indicated that the Miss America pageant garnered a 12.5 or 24 market share despite the network change and allowing contestants to wear two-piece swimsuits (Nielsen Media Research).

[7]In "Miss America Pageant Sets Stage for 'Navel' Battle," David Morgan points out that, "to guarantee modesty, two-piece swimsuits must have a 'full bottom' that comes no more than an inch below the belly button."

[8]This phrase often appears in feminist discussion of female representation in art, e.g., "Is the Gaze Male?" by E. Ann Kaplan.

[9]The Miss America Archives (Internet) states that, in addition to having a "35-inch bust, 36-inch hips and a 25-inch waist," Miss America of 1958, Marilyn Van Derbur, wore "a size 7B shoe, either a 12 or 14 dress and a size 7 glove."

[10]The title of a popular 1973 song by Bob Dylan.

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